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Viewing cable 09SANAA2250, YEMEN ABUZZ WITH TALK OF CT OPERATIONS; TTENTION SLOWLY TURNS TO U.S. ROLE

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09SANAA2250	2009-12-21 13:28	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET	Embassy Sanaa

Appears in these articles:

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SUBJECT: YEMEN ABUZZ WITH TALK OF CT OPERATIONS; TTENTION SLOWLY TURNS TO U.S. ROLE

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (S) SUMMARY. Yemenis have talked of little else but the counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda in the Arabian

Peninsula since news broke of the pre-dawn raids on December 17. Official media and ROYG officials have focused on the successful aspects of the operation, including an alleged 34 terrorists killed and 51 arrested. Independent and opposition media as well as the opposition Joint Meeting Parties and members of the Southern Movement have used the operations) specifically the deadly airstrikes in Abyan governorate) to criticize what they view as the ROYG's heavy-handed policies. After a series of stories on U.S. involvement broke in the U.S. media in the days after the strikes, local and pan-Arab media have begun to focus on this aspect of the story. ROYG media reported the conversation between President Obama and President Saleh and released an official statement that there was no U.S. military involvement in the raids. While President Saleh and the ROYG seem determined to move forward with similar strikes in the future (septel), still-nascent public support will depend on the ROYG's ability to effectively manage the evolving coverage of the events. END SUMMARY.

Heavy media coverage along partisan lines

12. (C) The ROYG made swift work of announcing the preemptive dawn strikes against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Sana'a and Abyan governorates on December 17. But ABC TV news reports of U.S. intelligence and logistical assistance to the ROYG were picked up on the same day by Yemen's opposition media, and were quickly followed by charges of scores of civilian deaths due to the "joint" airstrikes in Abyan by ROYG and U.S. forces. Opposition demonstrators and media outlets, as well as members of Parliament, have called for an investigation of the civilian deaths in Abyan due to the airstrikes. The story, heavily reported in the international press, of an extensive role by U.S. counter-terrorism forces in assisting the ROYG will linger as long as interest in the civilian deaths continues.

13. (C) Raids against AQAP at dawn on December 17 in Arhab (a suburb of Sanaa) and a training camp located in a village in Abyan's al-Mahfad district were reported immediately by the Ministry of Defense Web site 26sep.com and picked up by local and international media by noon on December 17. Reports of U.S. logistical and intelligence assistance to ROYG counter-terrorism forces were reported on ABC TV later the same day. That TV broadcast was swiftly reported on the opposition Islah party's Web site, al-Sahwa, repeating assertions of U.S. assistance to the ROYG, and citing unnamed eyewitnesses claiming that 18 children and 41 men and women were among the civilians killed by airstrikes. Also on December 17, al-Jazeera aired footage of civilian casualties and quoted locals as saying that U.S. aircraft were sighted on overflight surveillance on the eve of the airstrikes in Abyan. The official media was slow to respond to rapid coverage critical of the raids by opposition media and to organized protests in the region, instead focusing its initial reporting on AQAP leaders killed or captured in the raids.

Official media defends strikes, denies u.s. Involvement

14. (SBU) By December 18, the regional and international media, led by the report in the New York Times that the U.S. had given intelligence, firepower and other assistance to the ROYG in their raids against AQAP, began to cover the question of U.S. involvement. The sensationalist and often inaccurate Almenpar.net, the Houthis' official Web site, and Iran's PressTV.net both reported 63 people dead in the raids in Abyan, including 28 children. On December 19, the ROYG went on the offensive, reporting on the MOD's Web site that operations against AQAP militants were targeted to foil suicide bombers planning attacks against Yemeni and foreign installations, that the raids resulted in killing four suicide bombers and arresting four others, and that the attack on the training center in Abyan resulted in the deaths of 24-30 AQAP members. Al-Jazeera, meanwhile, broadcast a report on December 19 that the number killed in Abyan was

over 60, according to eyewitnesses, and that most of the deaths were civilians. The satellite channel also showed video of artillery shells with visible serial numbers and claimed that "U.S. warplanes or cruise missiles probably conducted the strike." On December 21, official media

attempted to get the damaging story of civilian deaths off the front pages by diverting focus to the war in Sa'ada.

Elites react with reserve, some praise

¶5. (S) Gauging public opinion on the December 17 CT strikes is difficult since the majority of Yemen's population is rural and no national polling systems exist. The political elite as represented by Embassy contacts, however, have generally reacted with reserve, and some have even offered praise for "long-overdue" action. In an e-mail to EmbOffs, xxxxx congratulated the USG on the successful CT operations, which he praised as necessary to rid Yemen of terrorist elements. xxxxx, told PolOff that the strikes were necessary to bring Abyan back from the edge of extremism. "Al-Qaeda travels freely throughout Abyan and Shebwa, using their training camps. They now number in the thousands in these areas," he said. Criticism among the elite classes has so far been limited to loss of civilian life and largely avoided any criticism of the U.S. xxxxx to PolOff on December 20, "We do not support religious, ideological or political extremism, but to use military violence that kills innocents on the pretext of pursuing criminals is wrong." xxxxx often critical of ROYG policies - told PolOff on December 18 that he perceived the operations as successful, but wished the Arhab operation had netted the "big fish," AQAP Operational Commander Qassim al-Rimi, which would have provided a better justification for any civilian losses.

Opposition hits back, citing civilian deaths

¶6. (S) Members of the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), Parliament and the Southern Movement have all used the airstrikes in Abyan as a means to attack the ROYG for what the oppositionists call heavy-handed policies. The strike in Maajala in Abyan's al-Mahfad district, which locals have reported killed 49 "civilians" (including 17 women and 23 children), comes on the heels of a critical and widely read Human Rights Watch report focused on the ROYG's violent suppression of political demonstrations in the southern governorates released on December 15. (Note: Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and Security Affairs Rashad al-Alimi told the Ambassador that civilians killed in the airstrikes were most likely poor Bedouin from the area providing logistical support to the terrorists and AQAP family members. End Note.) Non-stop al-Jazeera coverage of the aftermath of attacks in Abyan has provided fuel for the opposition. On December 20, Parliament, led by opposition Islah party member from Abyan Ali al-Ashal, called Alimi and the Minister of Defense to appear before the legislative body to discuss reports of civilian deaths in Abyan.

¶7. (S) The JMP immediately seized on reports of civilian deaths, using the December 17 airstrikes as an excuse not to participate in President Saleh's National Dialogue, set to begin on December 26. The Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) called for the ROYG to compensate victims' families and pay for treatment of those wounded in the operations. Local media reported that "thousands" protested in the perpetually restive southern governorates of Lahj and Abyan, calling for an investigation into the attacks. Rumors were rampant among secessionists in southern Yemen that the attack did not target an AQAP training camp, but rather a civilian population. xxxxx the airstrikes in Abyan as another occasion to promote the movement as a better CT partner for the U.S. than the ROYG. He told PolOff on December 20, "The Saleh regime is trying to mix up al-Qaeda with the movement. We're willing to cooperate with you to avoid killing innocent

people and kick out al-Qaeda."

Royg frustrated, but willing to stay the course

18. (S) The ROYG has weathered the storm of criticism) most of it from the usual suspects) well, and has restated its commitment to continue similar operations against AQAP in the near future. Alimi, speaking for President Saleh, told the Ambassador on December 20 that his government was determined to keep hitting AQAP in cooperation with the U.S. (septel).

Political observers in Sana'a have suggested that President Saleh received a significant morale boost from personal, congratulatory phone calls from President Obama and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak the day of the strikes. A weary-sounding xxxxx, "The attack is already causing the government a headache because the JMP is using it as the reason not to participate in the National Dialogue," which will include economic as well as political issues. However, the ROYG) often eager to use flack from the opposition as an excuse not to move forward in controversial CT operations) has indicated that it is willing to weather the most recent criticism.

Comment

19. (S) The December 17 operations against AQAP have proven a success and served as a significant distraction in the local media from the government's protracted civil war in the north of the country. In Sana'a at least, many Yemenis seem to accept the necessity and inevitability of similar CT action as al-Qaeda's presence in Yemen's lawless tribal governorates has ballooned in recent months. The ROYG, however, must be more proactive in countering inaccurate opposition stories and AQAP propaganda regarding the loss of innocent lives in the Abyan airstrikes, especially if future operations are already in the works. While the U.S. has escaped the brunt of criticism to date, continued leaks from Washington and international media coverage of American involvement could stir up anti-American resentment in Yemen and test the ROYG's professed commitment to going after AQAP. END COMMENT.
Seche